

00557

1962/10/21

DEPARTMENT OF STATE
THE DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

October 21, 1962

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Reviewed by: Elijah Kelly Jr. SUBJECT:
Date: 3/13/92 19__

The Secretary

INR - Roger Hilsman

Soviets Skirt Issue of Cuban
Missile Buildup

We have analyzed recent private conversations between high American and Soviet officials (Bowles-Dobrynin, October 13; Khrushchev-Kohler, October 16; and the President-Gromyko, October 18). A systematic Soviet effort to avoid making the Cuban buildup the subject of a direct US-Soviet confrontation has impressed us as an important element in these conversations, and we wish to bring this to your attention in view of its policy implications.

Soviet Awareness of US Knowledge

Prior to any of these conversations the Soviet Union must have been aware of the fact that their deployment was at least generally known to the US. While it is unlikely that the USSR is aware of how detailed our knowledge is, the conversation between Ambassador Dobrynin and Mr. Bowles would have probably served to confirm Moscow's impression that the US was aware of the Soviet activity and actively considering how it would respond. While it may well be true that Dobrynin was genuinely unaware of the Soviet deployment, he appears to have been under instructions to seek out and report information on US views of the Cuban situation. And Mr. Bowles' cogency and vigor in presenting the US case (based only on his knowledge at that time of the IL 28's) very likely would have confirmed Moscow's suspicions that the US knew about the Soviet IREM deployment and was actively considering an appropriate response.

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15-00000

11/2/92

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Moscow's Cautious Reply

Thus, Khrushchev personally and those in Moscow who cleared Gromyko's instructions (even if one assumes the unlikely contingency that the Soviet Foreign Minister was not informed), must have been aware that the US knew about the Soviet missiles.

Under the circumstances, Khrushchev and Gromyko appear to have had remarkably little to say on the subject. Their remarks were confined to points which the USSR had made earlier. They repeated vague threats of retaliation in the event of US action against Cuba, referring generally to the war danger theme, but still avoiding any commitment to specific courses of action. Perhaps the most forceful of these references was Khrushchev's anecdote of the cowardly general who committed suicide -- a story which he had told last year in connection with Berlin. Gromyko's remarks to the effect that the USSR could not stand idly by in the event of aggression does not go beyond earlier Soviet public statements. Both again vaguely compared Cuba to US bases abroad, but did not draw the parallel sharply in terms of weapons. Both denied any offensive intentions in connection with Cuba.

Significance of Soviet Reticence

We believe that the tenor of the Gromyko and Khrushchev conversations suggest an attempt to avoid a direct confrontation with the United States over the issue of missile deployments in Cuba.

Moscow may well hope to avoid becoming overly committed to counteractions which it may not wish to take in response to vigorous US response to the Cuban buildup, and thus leave its hands free for negotiation and, if faced with extreme danger of war, for withdrawal with the least loss of face.

Implications for US Policy

We believe that US policy should take into account this apparent Soviet desire to avoid a direct US-Soviet confrontation on the Cuban issue.

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In words: Our public statements should be keyed to Cuban irresponsibility in obtaining offensive weapons rather than to the Soviet role in providing them.

In deeds: We believe that a blockade should not be directed exclusively at the USSR which ships arms but should be broadened to include petroleum (and perhaps other products) shipped by non-bloc countries.

If direct military action against Cuba becomes necessary, we should avoid singling out Soviet manned installations for attack.

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